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WILLIAM SAVERY, THE COLONIAL CABINET-MAKER, AND HIS FURNITURE

THE uprooting from ancestral homes in the vicinity of Philadelphia of certain pieces of extraordinarily beautiful furniture of the middle of the eighteenth century has long led to the belief among our collectors that a cabinet-maker of pre-eminent ability had successfully conducted his trade in the City of Brotherly Love. The identity of this hitherto unknown cabinet-maker,

great. The makers' labels as a rule have disappeared, hence the furniture collector is without that delightful historical association and mental companionship with the maker of his choicest pieces; an association which adds so largely to the ownership of plate made by Paul Revere and the other colonial silversmiths, whose marks have been made known to us by the research work of certain of our American collectors.

As yet little of the personal has been unearthed in regard to William Savery.



FIG. 1. LOWBOY, WALNUT, ABOUT 1760-1775

William Savery, has been disclosed through the finding of a tiny label attached to a superb lowboy now in the Manor House at Van Cortlandt Park, a charming little colonial museum furnished, cherished, and guarded by the Colonial Dames of the State of New York. This scrap of paper (see page 251) identifies the maker of the piece and allows us, by a process of comparison, to identify fairly successfully certain other pieces as coming from the same workshop. In the work of William Savery the Palmer Collection is exceedingly rich.

Personality in old American furniture has hitherto been almost a closed book. The difficulty of identification has been too

The Savery genealogy gives the following glimpse into his life and character:

"Suffice it to say, however, that the name was a common one both in England and Plymouth Colony, Massachusetts, in the latter place early in the seventeenth century, and in the Barbadoes during the latter half of the seventeenth century.

"Whether, therefore, William Savery, the founder of the Philadelphia family, was descended from the English direct or the English thru Barbadoes, we cannot tell, but of whatever origin, he came from the stock of the persecuted, in whom religious fervor was stronger than the ties of fatherland and kindred, impelling them to adopt a strange nationality as their

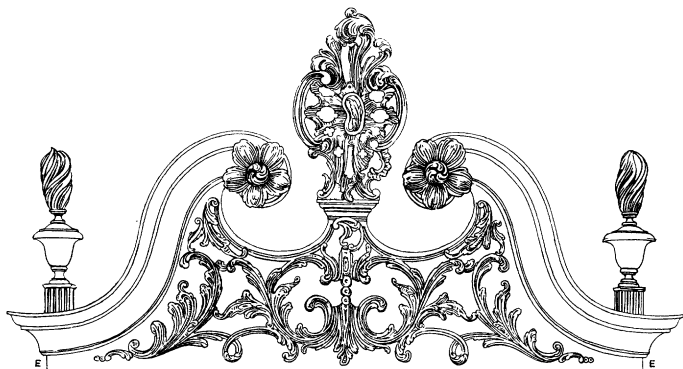


FIG. 2. HIGHBOY, WALNUT, ABOUT 1760-1775

own, and then again to cross the seas in renewed search for religious freedom.

"And so it is that William Savery, a Quaker, and we presume of the stock of the Quakers, first appears in Penn's 'green countrie town,' when on the 19th of April, 1746, he married Mary, the daughter of

taxes for the guardians of the poor in 1767. In the days when almshouses were conducted largely as public charities by Friends, he disbursed some of the moneys appropriated for this purpose, as appears from his manuscript, still in possession of the family.



DRAWING OF TOP OF HIGHBOY, FIG. 3

Reese Peters, an event duly recorded in the Meeting Records. His death too is recorded in 1787, aged 65, so his birth, wherever it occurred, must have taken place in 1721 or 1722.

"That his life was a busy one, his public activities, and the durability of the furniture which he made, amply attest. Numerous pieces in possession of various branches of the family, bespeak his excellent workmanship, in the shop 'At the Sign of the Chair, in Second Street, near the Market.' This legend is borne by one of his business cards, recently discovered, yellow with age and slightly torn, on the under woodwork of one of his Chippendale chairs.

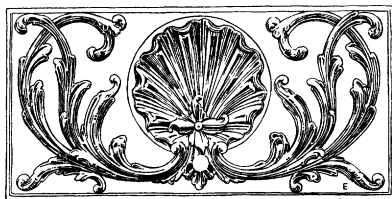
"In 1754, he was appointed assessor in some of the central wards of Philadelphia, Old City, and the certificate of appointment now in possession of the Pennsylvania Historical Society was signed *inter alia*, by Benjamin Franklin. He also served the city as agent and collector of

"Fragmentary and unsatisfactory as these few records seem, they are at the same time suggestive. They indicate an industrious public spirited citizen of pre-Revolutionary Philadelphia, of the ancient Quaker type, before the days when Elders frowned on activity in politics or the holding of public office.

"Of William and Mary Savery's children, the most noteworthy was William, the eminent minister in the Society of Friends, of whom elaborate biographies have been written. He died with-

out issue. Upon another son, Thomas, the perpetuation of the family name involved."

An exhaustive delving into the Philadelphia archives, conducted by my friend Alfred C. Prime, reveals the fact that William Savery's name appears (1780) in a return of the fourth, sixth, and eighth classes of militia of the Chestnut ward under command of Thomas Bradford. Opposite the name appears the word "old" as his reason for not complying with the



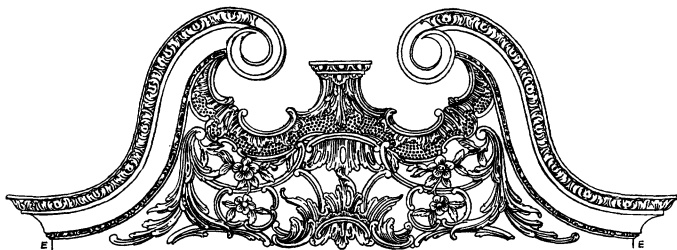
DRAWING OF DRAWER OF
HIGHBOY, FIG. 3



FIG. 3. HIGHBOY, MAHOGANY, ABOUT 1760-1775

muster. The records also evidence the progressive prosperity of his trade. In 1766 we find him receiving £52 per annum

believe that such superbly ornamented pieces as we are about to describe had been intended for dining room and parlor, while



DRAWING OF TOP OF HIGHBOY, FIG. 4

as rental for a house on Third Street; his tax bill in 1774 was £37, and in 1780 £149/16/6 upon a property valuation of \$46,000; indisputable arguments in favor of the large and profitable trade Savery must have built up during the probable period of the furniture I believe to have been made by him.

The pieces in the Palmer Collection which can be definitely ascribed to Savery are three high chests, two dressing tables, and a secretary-desk. These high chests and dressing tables, so long erroneously termed highboys and lowboys that for purposes of popular description we are compelled to adopt this nomenclature,

their simpler and earlier prototypes found usefulness largely in the bedrooms of their owners.

All of the Savery furniture we are discussing is made of mahogany or of Virginia

walnut of a quality most difficult to distinguish from mahogany, and is of the cabriole or bandy-leg style, which in this country superseded the straight turned leg so familiar to us in the gate-legged tables and early highboys.



DRAWING OF DRAWER OF HIGHBOY, FIG. 4

English furniture of

this style was recently discussed in the June number of the Burlington Magazine, by H. Avray Tipping, Esq., who there describes this form of leg as of very early



DRAWING OF SKIRT OF HIGHBOY, FIG. 4

are essentially an American type, as this form of high chest, which appeared in England late in the seventeenth century, went out of vogue early in the eighteenth century before the bandy-leg style of furniture became prevalent.¹ It is but reasonable to

origin, dating it back to Roman days, and as coming into vogue in the time of Louis XIV and being much used by the leading

¹The only English highboy with cabriole legs known to me is the one illustrated on Plate 210 of Percy McQuoid's *Age of Walnut*; a plain early

eighteenth-century inlaid walnut piece. In this the characteristic shell of the period is introduced as a pendant on the center of the skirt as well as on each leg, ornamentation similar to that which appears on figs. 1 and 2 carved in Philadelphia a half a century later.



FIG. 4. HIGHBOY, MAHOGANY, ABOUT 1760-1775

cabinet-makers of Europe until the end of the eighteenth century.

Nature supplied the motive: just as the scroll was evolved from the form of the wave, the immediate derivation of the cabriole was a living animal form. The origin of the term as given in this article is most interesting: "Cabriole was a French dancing term meaning a goat leap. It is noticeable that a goat's foot was at first generally used to terminate the furniture leg that took the name and assumed the form that is a decorative adaptation of a quadruped's front leg from the knee downwards."

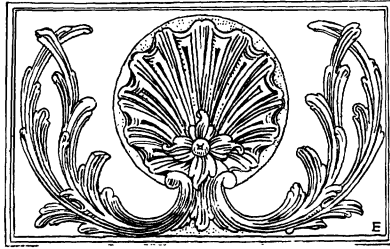
Where Savery learned his craftsmanship is as yet unknown. The simple, well-made chair of the Dutch style of the middle of the eighteenth century, bearing the Savery label, and owned by A. H. Savery, Esq., a lineal descendant, certainly might well have been made by any of a hundred cabinet-makers. It may have been on the other side of the water; more probably it was in the shop of some of the numerous English cabinet-makers, whose advertisements in our New York and New England colonial newspapers informed their Ameri-

pared to supply to prospective buyers.

There is more than a possibility that the name of Savery belongs on the roll of many of our great American artists and craftsmen who, without the advantages of early study and training, by self-education carved their way into undying fame. The influence of the designs published by Robert Manwaring are most apparent here and

there. Unquestionably Savery made close study of the books published by Thomas Chippendale, plates of which cover the walls of the exhibition room. He also unquestionably received inspiration for many of the decorative motives he used from the following Batty-Langley books, published in London, copies

of which are in the Museum Library: *Guide to Builders* (1729), *Langley's Treasury of Designs* (1740), *Gothic Architecture* (1747), the *Builders' Director* (1767). These little volumes were published at a moderate price, thereby enabling their use by all working in the industrial arts. Their hundreds of well-engraved plates were intended, not to be slavishly copied but for basic suggestions upon which the individuality of the artisan was allowed



DRAWING OF DRAWER OF
LOWBOY, FIG. 5



DRAWING OF SKIRT OF LOWBOY, FIG. 5

can patrons that they had arrived from London and that "Every Article in the Cabinet, Chair-Making, Carving, and Gilding Business, is enacted on the most reasonable Terms with the Utmost neatness and punctuality." Advertising is not a modern art, as many of the cabinet-makers' advertisements describe in the most alluring terms the various articles of household furnishings they were pre-

pared to supply to prospective buyers.

The positive¹ identification of the three

¹It is but fair to state that the argument rests entirely upon the label illustrated on page 251 and is strengthened by the knowledge of Savery's financial success at his trade. Time may disclose the fact that other cabinet-makers of equal merit lived in Philadelphia. It is partly with the hope of stimulating research as to the lives of our early master cabinet-makers that this article has been written.

superb highboys, two lowboys, and secretary-desk as coming from the joiner's shop of Savery is not difficult. All were household furnishings of homes in Philadelphia or its vicinity. Most fortunately several years ago the Museum acquired from the estate of Richard Canfield a fine highboy¹ and lowboy,² whose principal decorative motives and makership are unmistakably the same as those found on the Van Cortlandt Manor lowboy. These are on exhibition in Gallery F21 and are illustrated

their fluted bases found on the top of a highboy¹ in the Palmer Collection (fig. 3). The similarity of the recessed quartered columns on the sides and the carvings of shell and foliations on the lower drawer strengthen our argument. The applied foliated scrolls on the top are peculiar to Savery, and are possibly an attempt to obtain in mahogany the effect of the golden bronze applied ornamentation found on so much of the French furniture of the period. The surmounting foliated and



FIG. 5. LOWBOY, MAHOGANY, ABOUT 1760-1775

herewith (figs. 1 and 2). The peculiar curves on the top of the lowboy, the recessed ends with quarter-fluted columns inserted, the shells on the skirt and knees, the character of the carving of the intaglio shell and the feathery foliations accompanying it, admit of only one decision, namely that it and the labeled lowboy had the same maker. Its companion highboy (the two pieces apparently having been made as a pair) gives great assistance in the attribution of the other pieces. It has the same peculiar urn and flame finials with

rococo cartouche which tops the piece, Mr. Lockwood suggests, was probably inspired by the cartouche over the pulpit of St. Peter's Church, Philadelphia. The piece was purchased by Mr. Palmer from the great grandson of the original owner, James Moulder, a captain of artillery in the Revolution, and one of those who crossed the Delaware with Washington to take part in the battle of Trenton.

The finest of the highboys, and the finest of the Savery pieces known, was secured by Mr. Palmer only after a chase of over twenty years. The shells with their folia-

¹ Accession No. 15.21.1.

² Accession No. 15.21.3.

¹ Accession No. 18.110.60 ab.

tions, the quatrefoil rosettes as bases for handles, the scrolls and the acanthus leaves on the legs may well have been inspired by the plates in the books of Robert Manwaring, London (1765-75). Its cartouche and finials have unfortunately disappeared. Mr. Palmer notes that on one of his periodic and fruitless visits to induce the owner to part with her coveted possession, he was offered the cartouche and finials as a gift, in order to lessen his disappointment. To his now great regret, his unwillingness to commit vandalism compelled him to refuse the offer. He remembers them as being similar to the ones on the piece we have just been describing.

Certainly no pieces of early American furniture show the richness of carving and design found on the highboy¹ and lowboy² shown in figs. 4 and 5. French and Chippendale influences predominate: the carvings of vines on the quartered columns are suggestive of Spanish and French influences and may have been inspired by the plates in Langley's *Guide to Builders* (1727);

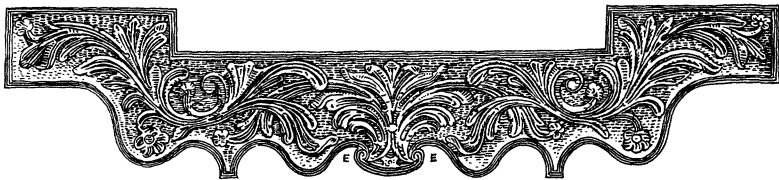
appears to have been made previous to the period of Savery's finest work. The ornament on the quartered columns is very suggestive of that which appears on the writing desk of rather similar shape designed by William Kent for Lord Leicester about 1740, which is illustrated on page 170 in *Furniture in England from 1660 to 1760* by Francis Lenygon.

The base of the third highboy¹ (fig. 7) unquestionably identifies this piece as made by Savery; the influence of Chippendale dominates it. The urns and their drapings may have been copied after those on an Inigo Jones

bookcase, Plate CLXI of Chippendale's *The Gentleman's and Cabinet Maker's Director*, London (1754), and the female head and bust frequently appeared on the plates of the various architectural books of Langley. The peculiar designs of the beautiful fret-work beneath the cornice on this, as well as that which appears on the desk we are next describing, may well have been worked out from Plate 31 of *The Cabinet and Chair-maker's Real Friend and Com-*



DRAWING OF DRAWER OF
LOWBOY, FIG. 6



DRAWING OF SKIRT OF LOWBOY, FIG. 6

the work on the skirts and legs involuntarily calls to mind the best English work of the Chippendale period.

The decoration on another lowboy³ (fig. 6) does not maintain the same standard of excellence; the design on the lower drawer is more involved and uncertain and the carving less firmly executed than in the piece just described. The piece

panion by Robert Manwaring, cabinet-maker, London (1775), a copy of which is in the Museum Library. The original flat plate handles have been replaced by those shown in the illustration. Instead of the characteristic shell and foliation on the lower drawer, a design of floriated scrolls and birds has been used.

The beautiful desk² (fig. 8) which had lived its quiet life at Camden across the

¹Accession No. 18.110.6.

²Accession No. 18.110.7.

³Accession No. 18.110.2.

¹Accession No. 18.110.4.

²Accession No. 18.110.1.

river from Philadelphia until brought to light by the omnivorous Palmer is also thoroughly Chippendale in feeling. Its whole workmanship stamps it as almost a companion piece to the highboy just described.

The evidence in regard to the tripod stand¹ and the remarkable tea table² (figs. 9 and 10) is as yet purely circumstantial. The tripod stand has long been in the Lawrence family, and was bought by Mr. Palmer at the same time as the

its proportions and the delicacy of the form of its base.

The two sideboard tables¹ (figs. 11 and 12) are of great merit and are typically European in general character; they cannot as yet be definitely ascribed to Savery. The less elaborate was found in an old house in Baltimore and is generally agreed to be of American workmanship. Authorities differ as to the origin of the other. It appears to be more French than English in character, but at this period Philadel-



FIG. 6. LOWBOY, MAHOGANY, ABOUT 1760-1775

superb highboy and lowboy (figs. 4 and 5). This allows the inference that the three pieces were originally purchased together and that the table stand is the work of Savery. The carvings on the bases of the two tables show great similarity of motive and treatment. The guilloches on both are identical and must have been obtained from the Batty-Langley books, as they are not found on the Chippendale plates. The pie-crust table is remarkable not only for its extraordinary workmanship as to its carvings, but for

¹Accession No. 18.110.44.

²Accession No. 18.110.13.

phia had almost no trade with France. We know, however, that for a hundred and fifty years its home was with the Cadwalader family in Philadelphia, and a careful study of some of the carving allows more than a mere conjecture that the work may have been Savery's. The query naturally arises, if these tables are American and of the vicinity of Philadelphia, who but Savery could have made them?

No attempt has been made to describe in detail the superb workmanship of the various Savery pieces; only upon the closest scrutiny are revealed the beauty of their

¹Accession Nos. 18.110.12 and 18.110.27.

moldings, the strength and simplicity of design of their carvings, and the variety of form and ornament. Every bit of their detail invites careful study. Certain pieces of the furniture have been described minutely in Mr. Lockwood's book on American furniture. Possibly some little idea of the beauty of their decorations can be obtained from the accompanying drawings.

What were the original prices paid for the beautiful colonial furniture we have been describing? Little light has been thrown upon this interesting subject. The account books of the cabinet-makers have long since disappeared. What slight information we have inclines to the belief that the actual cost of such pieces made them prohibitive except to the favored few. In an appendix to that thesaurus of information on Colonial Furniture of New England, published by Dr. I. W. Lyon of Hartford (1891), is found almost the only information we have as to the cabinet-makers' selling prices at about the period in which Savery worked. A perusal of its contents,

RULE and PRICE of JOYNERS' WORK

Providence, March y^e 24th; 1757 made
By us Subscribers the Price of Joyners' work.

A Loe Case of Draws @ £33

Do with Polished handels @ £36

Plane Desk @ £45; with Polished handels @ £48

Desk with two tear of Draws £55

A high Case of Draws @ £70

Maple rule Joynt tables @ £6 Pr foot; old fashen Joynts @ £5.10.

Common tea table @ £10

Citchen table @ £12
Beadsted with high



DRAWING OF DRAWER OF
HIGHBOY, FIG. 7

Posts, £12

Palet Beadsted @ £18

Do with Loe Posts @ £10

Trundel Beadsted @ £11

Pine Chests with two Draws @ £22

D^o with one Draw @ £16

Maple Chest with two Draws @ £26

D^o with one Draw @ £20

House Chest @ £10

Maple Cradel @ £12



DRAWING OF SKIRT OF HIGHBOY, FIG. 7

given below, informs us not only of the relative values of the pieces listed, but also of the fact that the so-called "combination in restraint of trade" is not a modern invention but was demanded by economic laws in this country one hundred and sixty years ago.

A TABLE OF PRICES FOR JOINERS' WORK
IN PROVIDENCE, R. I., IN 1757, COPIED
FROM THE ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT IN THE
POSSESSION OF MR. JOSEPH J. SMITH, OF
PROVIDENCE, R. I.

Do Pine @ £10

Common Seat [sea] Chest @ £7

Do 4 feet Long @ £8

Mehogny Stand table @ £30

D^o Black walnut @ £26

Maple Do @ £20

Maple Candel Stand @ £10

Do. Walnut £12. Do Mehogny @ £16

Mehogny high Case of Drawers @ £100

Do with Crown and Claws @ £150

Mehogny Chamber table @ £50

Mehogny Desk with 2 Draws @ £90

Walnut D^o with 2 tear of Draws £75



FIG. 7. HIGHBOY, MAHOGANY, ABOUT 1760-1775

BULLETIN OF THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

Black walnut high Case of Draws @ £85.
 Mahogany Rule Joynt tables @ £11 a
 feet.

Walnut Do @ £ [figures gone] a foot.

To Casen of a Desk @ £5.

A Desk with two teer of Draws & y^e
 Protitious Brought froward £41.

A Bedstid with Cock Tinnonts £10.

A Desk with two teer of Draws one
 Square Draw £39.

Gershom Carpenter

Grindall Rawson

Benja Hunt

John Power

Phillip Potter

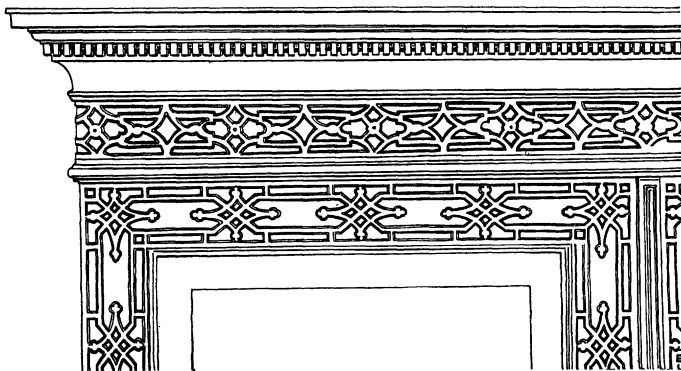
Joseph Sweeting.

Values are at best comparative. Colonial currency was inflated and fluctuated widely and can be estimated only by the purchasing power of money for the daily necessities of life. Wheat then averaged four shillings six pence a bushel, and potatoes a sixpence more. Beef cost three pence a pound and the wage for common labor was eleven shillings a day. With these standards in view and with the knowledge acquired from the above-

mentioned list, in which we find £150 is given as the price of a mahogany "high Case of Drawers with Crown and Claws," it is safe to assume that the cost of such of the large pieces as are illustrated herewith represented at least the yearly wage of an ordinary laborer.

American art and American crafts of today, after long years of non-appreciation, are coming into their own. The loan collections of our colonial silver exhibited in Gallery 22 have done much to enlighten us as to the excellence of the work of our early silversmiths, as well as to give inspiration to the silversmiths working to-day. The magnificence of some of our colonial furniture has hitherto been known only to the few. Careful reproductions of the beautiful colonial furniture made by Savery, now on exhibition, cannot fail to find their way eventually into many an American home modeled after the homes of the men who founded this republic of ours, and there give their silent testimony as to the artistic tastes of the forefathers so dear in memory to all Americans.

R. T. H. HALSEY.



DRAWING OF CORNICE AND FRETWORK ON SECRETARY, FIG. 8



FIG. 8. SECRETARY, MAHOGANY, ABOUT 1760-1775